

# **‘The Mirage of Action’: Exploring the Social Work Professions’ Perpetuation of White Supremacy Through ‘Well-Intentioned’ Actions**

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**Abstract:** *This autoethnographic study highlights complex strategies for maintaining white supremacy used by “well-intentioned” heterocentric white female social workers that are enacted under the guise of practicing anti-racism in social work practice settings, classroom environments, policy initiatives, and advocacy work. Using autoethnography was both unplanned and deliberate. Unplanned, we needed a research method that allows us to explore the untouchable subject of heterocentric white female social workers and deliberate in that we could use our experiences to break ground and establish white supremacy among heterocentric white female social workers that espouse anti-racist values as an area of study. We draw on education, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines to name some of the ongoing challenges to dismantling racism, colonialist, and reformer narratives in social work, and identify strategies used by all white folk, but particularly heterocentric white female social workers to neutralize the suggestion or accusation of their acts as racism. We name three challenges to dismantling racism among heterocentric white female social workers: hiding behind the data, anti-racist book clubs, and crying and comfort. We conclude with further questions for those who hold power in the field and a reflection upon our own continued intersecting struggles with these concepts.*

**Keywords:** *White supremacy, social work, heterocentric white women, discomfort, racism*

Social work education strives to enhance practice across client systems, with the ultimate goal of attaining social and economic justice for all, but particularly for marginalized populations. A competency-based approach to educating and training social work students is used ostensibly to address diversity, oppression, and social justice. However, social work education has historically and continually failed to meet inclusive, diversity-related professional goals (Lasch-Quinn, 1993; Specht & Courtney, 1994; Turner et al., 2018). Scholars continually demonstrate that social work education does not change social work students’ oppressive and racist beliefs (Corley & Young, 2018; Danforth et al., 2020; Lee & Bhuyan, 2013; McLaughlin, 2005; McMahan & Allen-Meares, 1992; Tolliver et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2018). While some scholars focus on educational techniques, others focus on the concepts in this area of study.

While there is a significant body of literature on racism in the social work profession, diversity, anti-racist social work education, and the intersection of social work and structural racism in society, little has been written in social work literature about the particular and unique ways in which heterocentric white women maintain white supremacy within social work. This article attempts to highlight the complex strategies which are used by “well-intentioned” heterocentric white female social workers to maintain white

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supremacy under the guise of practicing anti-racist work. We choose to highlight white supremacy among heterocentric white women social workers because the profession was founded by heterocentric white women - the “friendly visitors” - and women and white people dominate the profession (Center for Health Workforce Studies, 2006; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Trattner, 1999). Surprisingly, there is a myth that experiencing gender oppression allows women to better recognize oppression and subsequently dismantle it (Amico, 2017; Collins, 1990; DiAngelo, 2018; Frankenberg, 1993; Trepagnier, 2010/2017; Turner et al., 2018).

While we attempt to explore heterocentric white female social workers and white supremacy, this article will not give you answers. We are not here to discuss solutions to racism and white supremacy in social work because all too often discussions of racism quickly offer solutions that do not necessarily end racist behavior, but can mask some people’s racist behavior in language, beliefs, and behaviors that seem anti-racist (Trepagnier, 2017). Similar arguments apply to discussions of oppression in society. Instead, we discuss three of these strategies evident in “well-intentioned” heterocentric white female social workers that occur in practice, classroom, policy and advocacy work. To guide our construction of this problem, we draw on research in education, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines and autoethnography to begin to explore some of the ongoing challenges in dismantling racism, colonialist, and reformer narratives in current social work education and practice, to identify strategies used by all white folk to upend change efforts, and how heterocentric white female social workers employ these strategies and neutralize the suggestion or accusation of their acts of racism. These strategies prevent the uncomfortable yet necessary conversations about racism and limit social workers from deepening their awareness and authentic conversations around anti-racism.

### **White Supremacy and Social Work**

The social work profession has referential texts including dictionaries, encyclopediae, and handbooks. Shockingly, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) press *Social Work Dictionary* does not include a definition for white supremacy (Barker, 2014). Neither does the *Comprehensive Handbook of Social Work and Social Welfare* (Rowe & Rapp-Paglicci, 2008; Thyer, 2008; White, 2008), the *Oxford University Dictionary of Social Work and Social Care* (Harris & White, 2013), the Taylor and Francis *Dictionary of Social Welfare* (Timms & Timms, 1982/2016), nor the *NASW Encyclopedia of Social Work* published by Oxford University Press (Mizrahi & Davis, 2020). Is white supremacy ignored by the profession? As white supremacy is not defined in the prominent reference works for the social work profession, it should not be surprising that it is typically overlooked in social work education.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2020) defines white supremacy as “the belief that the white race is inherently superior to other races and that white people should have control over people of other races and the social, economic, and political systems that collectively enable white people to maintain power over people of other races” (para. 1). Walsdorf, and colleagues (2020) expand upon the system purported in the above definition and describe white supremacy as “...an intricate and interconnected system of structures

and processes by white people maintaining control and control power, wealth, and resources” (p. 66). In contrast to Walsdorf and colleagues’ notion of white supremacy as a system, DiAngelo (2018) defines white supremacy “...as an overarching political, economic, and social system of domination” (p. 42). Chapman and Withers (2019) seem to focus on the interactive components and as they define white supremacy as referring “...to normative and even liberal discourses, practices, and structures that give disproportionate value to white bodies, minds, institutions, countries, values, and mores” (p. 5). Informed by these definitions, we consider white supremacy as an (1) interpersonal, organizational, and societal phenomenon in which whiteness is assumed to be the norm, (2) that the feelings, behaviors, and thoughts of white people supersede all other groups, (3) that passing as white is perceived as beneficial in different contexts, (4) that institutions are structured so that white people can have power over marginalized populations, (5) that white people have greater access to power, wealth, and resources, and, (6) that white people use tactics to maintain control, power, and resources in ways that are detrimental to marginalized groups. While some might not view this definition of white supremacy as comprehensive enough, these six pillars of white supremacy uphold American society and align with social work thinking about systems interactions. These pillars also suggest that other social groups are examined against this “norm,” and allow us to include tactics for dodging cultural diversity (Pewawardy, 2003). These tactics for dodging cultural diversity will be discussed later in this paper. These tactics will be linked to white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), white silence (Saad, 2020; Sue, 2015); silent racism (Trepagnier, 2017), and other forms of oppression that white people overtly and covertly commit against marginalized populations (Turner et al., 2018).

White supremacy has been at the roots of social work since its inception (Lasch-Quinn, 1993). While Ida B. Wells and other women of color were just as important as Jane Addams to the history of social work, it is often Addams and her white sisters that are the focus of social work history (Beck, 2019; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Trattner, 1999). The phenomenon of “friendly visiting” and the Charity Organization Society (COS), through which middle-class white women “helped” under the auspices of providing moral guidance, evolved into casework (Beck, 2019; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Trattner, 1999). Additionally, throughout the birth and infancy of the United States of America, white supremacy acted as a sieve during the developing racial contract that was codified into laws enabling whiteness to be protected through social capital. White supremacy thus buoyed friendly visiting and consequently wormed its way into casework, social work practice, research, education, licensing, and accreditation (Almeida et al., 2019; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Lasch-Quinn, 1993; Lopez, 2006).

Since friendly visiting and the settlement house era, the field of Social Work has not made much progress towards decolonization (Gray et al., 2013). Examples in practice include the biopsychosocial assessment which is rooted in white values and belief systems around problem formation, strengths, and treatment planning (Almeida et al., 2019; McNay, 1992) as well as using the DSM-V as a diagnostic tool that is based on a Western medical model which pathologizes client responses to individual, collective, and systemic traumas (Jacob et al., 2013; Kriegler & Bester, 2014); Also, in social work education courses labeled as “diversity” or “cultural competence”, in which whiteness is held to the

standard from which “others” deviate and become “otherized,” are numerous. Almeida and colleagues (2019) make a critical point in stating “...terms like multiculturalism, intolerance, diversity, cultural competence, cultural humility, and cultural sensitivity all emerged without an interrogation of cultural imperialism and coloniality” (p. 159), that further perpetuates oppressive structures throughout the profession. Because space restricts the depth and breadth in which we can discuss how deeply white supremacy operates within social work and few researchers are examining white supremacy or racism *within* social work, we chose to examine three strategies that enact white supremacy particularly by cis-gendered, heterocentric white female social workers: *hiding behind the data*, *anti-racist book clubs*, and *crying and comfort*. We start this contribution to the profession with a description of our positionality to orient readers to who we are.

### **Our Positionality**

We have intentionally chosen for Elisabeth Counselman-Carpenter to share her story first, and for it to be a shorter narrative in part to challenge the significant space that white voices take up in discussing racism and to acknowledge her own participation in societal and professional white supremacy. Jemel Aguilar’s story and positionality has been intentionally placed second and is more detailed in order to dovetail into the discussion of strategies.

### ***Second author***

I am a White, cisgender, feminine-presenting lesbian single mother. I look like the folk about whom this article is written, and I have benefitted from a long-standing system of white supremacy and multiple levels of privilege that in addition to being white include being highly educated, able-bodied and cis. However, as a sexual minority and a womxn, I have often been sandwiched between oppressors and the actions of oppression. Folk with dominant identities often mistake me for “one of them” and have the expectation that I will toe the line of the dominant narrative while supporting the agendas and narratives of microaggressions discussed in this article. When I do not support these efforts to continue harnessing dominant agendas, I have been openly and privately punished by my colleagues. Subsequently, there is a constant hyper-vigilance required to survive as a junior faculty member who is profoundly dependent on the whims and opinions of senior faculty members, all of whom bear more dominant identities than my own. This hypervigilance is compounded then by the need to professionally and personally support students who share some of my marginalized identities. As one of the only faculty that teaches courses about non-dominant identities and openly shares their queer identity as well as the challenges of working-outside-the-home single motherhood, I am also seen by students as a person to whom to turn about non-dominant identity struggles. Students regularly come to me for support with the coming out process, the transition process, single parenting, and how to navigate queerness in today’s professional world. This leads to a splitting of my identities as oppressed OR oppressor, rather than a holistic perspective of my multiple identities that come with privilege and exclusion simultaneously all of which influence how I am in the classroom, research, and the world.

### ***First Author***

I am a Puerto Rican gay male with an invisible disability that passes as a black gay male without a disability. Passing as a black male, I have had many personal and professional discriminatory experiences from white-identified people that resemble those described by black men in the social media, news outlets, and research literature including stories of white women's purse clutching on elevators, being called on to be the voice for black or brown people, and interpersonal interactions that fetishize, tokenize, and patronize me. Many others assume that I am able-bodied and openly mock me when I acknowledge my disability or quietly mock the limitations forced upon me by my disability. Despite other people's views of me and my disability, I tenaciously pursued higher education in a field that I believed was "open to the diversity of experiences and backgrounds." I paid my way through undergraduate and each social work graduate program by working several jobs and many times was touted as the token "black face in social work" so that students of color would attend the program in which I studied or worked. Throughout my entire educational experience, as the "model" BIPOC student, I often contended with offensive comments by well-meaning heterocentric white women attempting to prove to me their own personal anti-racist stance. It never occurred to these same well-meaning white women that they were also ignoring the many other parts of me that did not fit with their anti-racist, color-bind lens.

As a social work student taking my one required "diversity" course, the course text naturally assumed that I, the reader, was a white female social worker headed into practice with non-white, lesbian or gay, low income or poor, non-English speaking people. Transfolx, bisexual-identified people, those questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation, allies, and others were not included in these pages. Needless to say, I did not read the book. The class was tedious and slanted to the cis-gendered well-meaning heterocentric white women in the room. I did not yet know that this trend would continue throughout my career.

A recent discussion among a group of primarily white social workers ignited my desire to throw down the gauntlet and stand up to the social work profession's placating of heterocentric white female social workers in diversity and other courses created to meet the CSWE standards for accreditation of social work education. I dare to discuss white supremacy in social work, yet honestly, I actively choose not to teach diversity courses in social work programs. I find the discussion of diversity in social work limited and a parsimonious approach that favors the education of heterocentric white female social workers at the cost of marginalized populations and the simultaneously of identity.

Here is my wish list: I would like the jargon used by social workers to mask their oppressive ideologies to end. I would like all social workers to be uncomfortable as all social work courses will discuss oppression in all its forms and target deep-seated beliefs that social workers hold about marginalized populations. I believe we, social workers, must identify how white supremacy exists in social work and is maintained as well as we must talk about our roles in oppression before we can engage in anti-oppressive practice. I say this because I see the world – both social work and American societies – through inextricably linked lenses that are not accounted for in the concepts of diversity,

intersectionality, or anti-racism. I begin this entry into the uncomfortable and threatening discussion of white supremacy acknowledging that my outward resistance to teaching diversity courses in social work programs adds to white supremacy. While my resistance to teaching diversity courses is still a part of me, my professorship and doctoral degree places me in a position of authority. While some white students and professors will see me as a Black professor, or a Black male professor, students with marginalized identities must experience an educated person with marginalized *identities* in a position of authority that stands steadfast in the face of white supremacy. Social workers with marginalized identities do not have to placate white folk, pander to their insecurities about their role in racism or white supremacy, and can pursue higher education without compromising themselves, their identities, or relinquishing their relationship to their marginalized communities. People with marginalized identities should unequivocally not accept the compartmentalized views of white folk, especially in social work.

### **Queering the Methodology**

Autoethnography is a methodological approach that can aid in understanding life experiences, meanings, social problems and practices from new angles (Bochner, 2016; Bochner & Ellis, 1996; Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010). Autoethnography in social work is a relatively new approach to qualitative data collection and analysis in that a Social Work Abstracts and SocIndex search in 2020, using the keywords “autoethnography” and “social work” yielded only approximately 74 English language, peer reviewed articles on a variety of topics including racism (Battle, 2017; Crawford, 1994), sexism, and homophobia (Turner et al., 2018). Autoethnography as a methodology allows researchers to reflect on their experiences. For example, as people with marginalized identities during the backdrop of the murders of African American at the hands of the police, a pandemic that is disproportionately killing marginalized community members, and a political structure that is dismantling protections against gay men, lesbians, transgender folk, populations of color, and low income populations across the United States of America, we used these experiences coupled with the research literature to create an autoethnographic account of white supremacy in the social work profession and among “well-intentioned” heterocentric white female social workers.

Unlike other forms of qualitative data collection, analysis, and presentation that demarcate “the literature,” “the data,” and “the analysis” in the presentation of the qualitative results, autoethnography interlaces the data with scholarly literature on the phenomenon or other articles that can inform the interpretation of the researchers’ experiences. Thus, the presentation of the results is a narrative that does not differentiate the data from what is used to interpret or expand upon it (Ellis, 2008). When we decided to engage in a discussion about white supremacy in social work, we considered several typical research options and found those data collection and analysis methods as lacking. We then turned to both our backgrounds in qualitative methodology. As we discussed the trajectory of this project, we shared our own stories of witnessing and being assaulted by the oppression of heterocentric white female social workers. We reflected on our experiences as students, educators, and practitioners and began to identify several common themes, not in the typically qualitative nomenclature, that resonated with our multiple

identities. We used our stories and experiences to guide a search of the social work literature and then expanded into other disciplines because of the limited theorizing and research into the ways in which white heterocentric female social workers enact white supremacist ideologies in spite of aligning themselves with anti-racist ideologies.

As discussed earlier, with the absence of social work literature as a guide on the topic of white supremacy, we turned to other bodies of knowledge to frame and understand our experiences, to examine the assumptions in the research literature, and to build a body of this research in the social work profession. We selected experiences from our histories that allow us to illustrate the different tactics and strategies that white female heterocentric social workers have used with us or around us to impede discussions about oppression, racism, and homophobia. These tactics and strategies support white supremacy by silencing the voices of marginalized folk. We narrowed in on three tactics and strategies that are present in fields such as education and anthropology but remain lacking in social work literature: *hiding behind the data*, *anti-racist book clubs*, and *crying and comfort*. The results presented in the following sections are sometimes found in literature in other disciplines as indicated by citations included, but rarely in Social Work.

### **Hiding Behind the Data**

“Let’s do a survey to find out more...” is a thinly veiled supremacist tactic of delay, burden, and redirection. As Applebaum (2017) states “it is easier to over-intellectualize one’s experience with white fragility by choosing to research it rather than sitting with the discomfort” (p. 863). How many times have you heard the statement: “we should really survey the students and faculty of color before moving forward with this training, workshop, webinar, program, or policy change?” The surveys and assessments often mentioned in these statements might repeatedly occur without much or any implementation of the results. But this process of survey and data analysis is a multistep process that accumulates added damage to marginalized scholars. Continual surveys and assessments slow down change and delete the voice of the students and faculty of color with the click of a key. This micro-strategy of assessing without discussing or implementing is designed to delay and derail progress toward toppling dominant norms that are many times rooted in white supremacist thinking and beliefs.

The decision to research a phenomenon affecting marginalized populations is then usually followed up by a “request” for a junior faculty member to volunteer to be the coordinator and administrator of the survey. Many junior faculty members are already burdened by the publish-or-perish structure of higher education, are assigned to teach the least palatable or worst scheduled sets of classes, and to advise students while participating in department and school wide committee work. If this junior faculty also holds a marginalized identity, then they carry the burden of also being the “go to” for students who share their identities or perceived to share them on top of requests to coordinate surveys about marginalized populations. This co-location of the request and research on marginalized populations for the education and knowledge expansion of, many times, people with white identities is akin to asking marginalized people to speak on behalf of

their communities but with added work and the emotional burden of researching marginalized populations for the benefit of white folk.

A sub-process in the research tactic occurs in the “testing” the survey to see if it answers the “right” questions and taps into the “right” audience as well as determining the reliability, validity, and rigorousness, and trustworthiness. Ultimately, the survey has to then be approved by senior faculty, program coordinators, and the chair, only to then be debated over at a department or school-wide faculty meeting, effectively stalling the project. The presence of racism in research is relatively well acknowledged within the academy as evidenced by what types of research are privileged, who is conducting the research, how instruments and research questions are constructed and overall biased data collection (D’Eon, 2019; Damian & Gonzalez, 2020; Hardeman & Karbeah, 2020; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). However, research within academic institutions that explores the experiences of faculty and students with marginalized identities has a specific set of barriers and delay tactics that are challenging. Many times, questions about the intent of the researchers, the potential of the researcher to influence or bias data collection, and how the results might be used to subversively delay the project by keeping it in a planning phase thereby never quite evolving to data collection and dissemination. The tacit implication of these arguments is that the data on racism or white supremacy can be weaponized, and thus heterocentric white folk must scrutinize the data collection instruments and “all (white) parties involved” must agree with the research process and data collection. This cumbersome process for the junior faculty of color does not even include the formal university research approval protocol and depending on the size of the department and program, can take weeks and months before approval, and then and only then does data gathering begin (Arday & Mirza, 2018). Meanwhile, in the wake of these tactics, the junior faculty member of color loses valuable research and scholarship time for studying their area of interest. Unfortunately, this process does not ease in that the next delay and diversion strategy occurs when the data are processed, and the results are finally complete. The delays under the guise of debate are thus an effective strategy to distance oneself from participation in active social action and change.

In contrast to focusing on elevating the voices of those surveyed or highlighting actual problems or concerns at hand, arguments often erupt about “the data” including how it is being analyzed, presented, and widely disseminated, rather than an *actual* discussion or actions about the phenomenon under investigation. Questioning the data might appear through statements or questions such as “how do we know this is how people really feel,” “is that everyone’s feelings because I know [x] number of [insert group] that do not feel that way,” “I don’t know if that is accurate, maybe respondents did not understand the question,” “you should look at this [opposite method than was used] to see if more people feel that way.” If one is too busy looking at the construction or deconstruction of the research method or “looking at the data”, then it perpetuates absolution from white guilt. Moreover, white faculty can then congratulate themselves for “deeply exploring” anti-racist topics and convince themselves that they are actually “taking action” when in reality, no action is occurring. For the junior faculty of color and other populations of color that took the time to answer the survey and share their life experience, the inaction leads to

repeated silencing and side-lining of respondent's stories that were harvested at the expense of dominant folk feeling satisfied by their work.

The final stage, and perhaps the most paralyzing, is the silencing that takes place when findings are shared with a greater audience. Again, it is common to hear, "well, we've learned that we really need to research and explore this more deeply", a statement that leads to inertia as the voices of those who need to be heard languishes in an Excel workbook or Word document. Silencing also demonstrates the strength of white exceptionalism as in these phenomena would "never" happen at "our" social work program or institution.

Once of the authors conducted a mixed method study of the marginalized student population in a social work program in a very large doctoral granting state university that illustrates many of the tactics and strategies described. Once data were gathered and analyzed, the data from that study produced unflattering results for the program. While processing the results in the faculty group, a white female social work professor inquired of the junior faculty of color who gathered and analyzed the data, "did you slant the results so that you can gain more power?" Another white faculty member said, "we shouldn't listen to that, obviously, they were not happy with the program." In another study at a different university, the project examined the perspectives of marginalized faculty and students as well as proposed targets for improving the experiences of these groups and produced very unflattering results in which specific racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist experiences were included. In subsequent meetings to review the results, the authors of this paper observed white, primarily female staff and faculty discussing two results out of the seven that were produced. The two results focused on developing a faculty-led group to address diversity and the need for innovative teaching modalities for faculty development. The results that focused on the deconstructing power structures, calls for changes in leadership because of the oppressive tactics such as tokenism that was frequently employed by leaders, a request for spaces for marginalized populations to organize and collaborate, and a change in policies that inhibit the growth of marginalized populations were completely omitted from the discussion. These are just two examples of how faculty with dominant identities, such as heterocentric white female faculty can spend an entire academic year's worth of faculty meetings debating how to study phenomena, rather than taking action, on the oppressive structures derived from white supremacy.

Ultimately, hiding behind the data is a form of intellectualization, first introduced as a defense mechanism by Freud who argued that intellectualization allows for the conscious analysis of an event in a way that does not provoke anxiety. In short, racism makes white people anxious, including those in social work where the majority are white heterocentric women (Trepagnier, 2017). Admitting one's participation in and intergenerational perpetuation of white supremacy also makes white people anxious (Trepagnier, 2017). Designing and asking questions, organizing painful narratives into tables, pie charts, and figures, as well as calling for more research allows white people to distance themselves from their anxiety by intellectualizing the process.

Another problematic facet in conducting research within one's program or about one's students is that white faculty can hide behind the work done by scholars of color. One example of this occurred during a meeting attended by both authors. A junior faculty

member of color called out a racist statement made by a white, more senior faculty member during a small, diverse group of mostly untenured junior faculty. The faculty of color stated to the white faculty member, "...this conversation here, right now in this moment, is an example of white supremacy and demonstrates racist behavior on your part." The white heterocentric faculty member responded by saying she would send the faculty member a folder of articles written by female scholars of color that would support the idea that he was being overly sensitive to the topic at hand. She continued on by saying she was highly informed on the topic because she frequently read research by female scholars of color and wanted to share her expertise from a feminist perspective. After the interaction, the faculty of color learned that the heterocentric white female faculty member discussed the incident with two other white female faculty members that were in the meeting and they both questioned, "why does he (the faculty member of color) treat you this way?" In this situation, the white faculty member hid behind her interpretation of female scholars of color and used that research as a weapon. The white heterocentric female faculty member also then collaborated with other white heterocentric female faculty members to weaponize the interaction as the faculty member of color's problem. In this vein of action, the white faculty member deflected the notion of her white supremacy through the shield of female scholars of color. Additionally, the white faculty members collectively created an intellectual divide between the claims of female scholars of color and the male faculty member of color. These tactics in sum are drawn from the legacy of white supremacy in America. Research is an important and vital tool to bring about social and individual change, yet research is also weaponized to prevent white discomfort. Hiding behind the data is an active form of white resistance masquerading as a form of action.

### **Anti-Racist Book Clubs and Trainings**

Alicia Garza, co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, which flourished in the spring of 2020 but was co-founded in 2013 after the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, defines it as an "ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise...an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression;" (Blacklivesmatter.com/herstory, paragraph 3). The number of invitations each author received via emails, tweets, and flyers encouraging us to join anti-racist book clubs, reading groups, discussion and processing groups was startling and overwhelming. We received lists of books, blogs, and videos to consume, and even found ourselves passing on and sharing some of these resources with colleagues, friends, and families. Passing on this material felt like action, it mimicked actions to dismantle white supremacy. Similarly, inaction that can look like action can be seen in the phenomenon on Instagram for #BlackoutTuesday. This online media event took place in late May 2020 when folx posted a simple black square - sometimes with a related hashtag #BlackLivesMatter - as a gesture of solidarity with the protests that followed the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Approximately 28 million posts appeared on that day, but due to the social media algorithms protest organizers did not reach their intended audience or stayed informed with what was happening in the world around them (Sinanan, 2020). In a similar fashion, as has been highlighted in the reflection on research discussion earlier, reading a text distances us

from stories and narration about the painful consequences of living in a world framed by oppression and oppressive practices.

Consuming media and text written by folx of color that challenges and calls out white supremacy and colonialist culture is critically important! However, we argue that the intended meaning of elevating voices of people of color and the dynamic process of sitting in the discomfort of one's own white history gets lost because joining and participating in a book club allows for the delusion of action by hiding behind text as well as perpetuating elitism. We have heard white heterocentric female social workers say, "I understand racism because I have read [fill in author]," when we have repeatedly witnessed their racist and oppressive actions. Thus, it is not enough for texts to be accessible to those who already may participate in book clubs, have access to well stocked libraries with inclusive programming and who, during the COVID-19 pandemic, could participate in the cashless process of ordering a book on Amazon from the luxury of their own devices. How are these texts made accessible to all white folx - those who live in rural locales, who may not be able to read, or who may not value the written word as transformational? Why are women of color, like Layla Saad, that outwardly challenge white supremacy by asking white folx to delve into their participation in white supremacy receiving death threats?

A question often asked, particularly in education, is "what can whites do" (Matias & Mackey, 2016)? While reading can help one understand how race impacts marginalized communities, it cannot be the exit on the highway of understanding one's own supremacy history. Unfortunately, book clubs such as these continue to perpetuate the myth of the white savior, and typically allow white folx to "liberate" or "empower" folx of color. We argue that this extends to "liberating" other "less-woke" white folx through the book club as well – a dangerous thought process that continues to perpetuate dominance of one group over another. Another danger of antiracist book clubs, particularly if homogeneous in nature, is that similar to white-dominant classroom, diversity training, and accountability groups, there is often an assumption that similarities between folx will result in experiences similar in personal viewpoint (Gillespie 2002). However, as Patel (2016) states, "...interrupting the material purposes of racism requires more than endless dialogue" (p. 82). Moreover, using the term "book club", "reading group" or "discussion group" insinuates something social or optional and that people have chosen to come together to process something. There is a performative nature to these types of gatherings especially within the social work profession that purports action over discussion. Frankenberg (1993) agrees that "...fundamentally, one needs to change the structure in order to change the white subject and that by paying too much attention to the white subject, activities run the risk of neglecting the structure they seek to change" (p. 896). Right now, many white social workers are having an existential crisis when realizing they have participated in generations of dominance and have perpetuated white supremacy, even as well-intentioned crusaders of social justice. However, many trainings, book clubs and discussion groups only perpetuate a type of navel-gazing at these existential crises and inhibit long-term changes in strategy or tactics that dismantle white supremacy (Frankenberg, 1993), because people can feel like they have completed an action by reading a book without changing anything within themselves, interpersonally, or in the structures of white supremacy.

This focus on reading over action belies an underlying tenet in social work education that combines academic knowledge (*reading and thinking*) with field practice (*action*). Social work is a practical field, in which a large portion of education is spent as an intern in an educationally grounded service role in community, agency, policy or administrative settings. Social work education's adherence to field education strives to link classroom learning with professional experience. The action-oriented foundation of field practice is a pivotal part of social work education and seems to be in direct contrast to the white supremacy that we are calling out in anti-racist book clubs, but field education also suffers from the mirage of "doing" as it relates to dismantling white supremacy. Literature and research on anti-racist field education is lacking in social work publications and the field experience has been called out for not addressing the needs of students of color, and Indigenous and Aboriginal students, let alone their clients with these identities (Dominelli, 1989; Gair, et al., 2015; Walter et al., 2011). While it is beyond the scope of this particular article, challenging the perpetuation of white supremacy in field education coursework and practice is desperately needed.

Reading is one pillar upon which awareness about one's role in white supremacy can be built, but it is not in itself a dismantling action. As Tre Johnson (2020) stated frankly and accurately in the title of his OpEd piece in the Washington Post, *When Black people are in pain, white people just join book clubs*. Book clubs, discussion groups and trainings are a part of unlearning white supremacist cultural norms, but participation must accompany action that allows for discomfort. We agree with Frankenberg's call to be pragmatic when exploring our relationship to racism and to avoid being "...mesmerized by it and thereby frozen into inactivity" (p. 187). In short, the answers to racism go much deeper than just reading and discussing.

Classes on diversity, oppression, and social justice focus on the discrimination of groups by another group. In the United States of America, white people and white-passing people of color are at the top of the oppression hierarchy and able to exercise power over other populations. They rule social groups through creating, supporting, maintaining, or ignoring systemic obstacles to success, creating stereotypes of marginalized populations that are repeatedly displayed in media and other parts of society, and dismissing the value or co-opting the contributions of marginalized populations in many segments of American society as already discussed. In many instances, cis-gendered heterosexual white women, are discriminated against because of their gender, but simultaneously hold valuable privilege because they are a part of the segment of society that can exercise control over marginalized populations. In the social work classroom, control is exercised when information that challenges heterocentric white women social worker's beliefs including their color-blind, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, and anti-oppressive attitudes. Control is enacted through "white tears." Moreover, white tears and the accompanying linguistic weapon of "feeling safe" drive how others surrounding heterocentric white female social workers should and do respond to the threats perceived against heterocentric white female social workers (Accapadi, 2007; Trepagnier, 2017). Despite the absence of safety afforded to black men and women, transgender men and women, and other marginalized populations, cis gendered heterocentric white female social workers weaponize "feeling safe" in the social work classroom, field placement, and social work profession (Boys et

al., 2018; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Quiros et al., 2012) rather than face discomfort about their beliefs and actions. White tears and “feeling safe” are ways that redirect uncomfortable conversations about race, homophobia, and transphobia, among other aspects of diversity or oppression towards silence and avoidance (Accapadi, 2007) and are symbolic ways that crying leads to comfort.

A final concern with anti-racist book clubs and related discussion groups is that they tend to prioritize one marginalized identity over others and do not consider the interlocking and indivisible aspects of multiple identities as well as an overarching examination of oppression. These social activities also privilege the written word over other forms of knowing. Finally, these spaces allow for the crying and comforting discussed in the following section to be perpetuated in a socially acceptable format.

### **Crying and Comfort**

All people at some point in time cry in reaction to emotional distress and are comforted by those around them. Crying is seen as an external manifestation of stress, discomfort, or injury and people are socialized to act in accordance with another’s distress. While people of all genders cry in many different situations, this section delves into crying as a deflection strategy that is expended by heterocentric white women in social work classrooms, practice settings, and organizational environments to solicit comfort and redirect assertions of racism or oppressive behavior that challenges self-beliefs about one’s anti-racist attitudes.

Historically, “white women’s tears” have been, intentionally or not, the catalyst for a response from those around them and are well documented as detrimental to marginalized populations such as black men, Transgender women, Latino men, and women of non-white ethnic backgrounds (Dorr, 2004; Hamad, 2020). Contemporary social media and news outlets, for example, depict how white women’s tears have been deadly to marginalized populations and black men in particular. Lynching and incarceration of black men to protect heterocentric white women is widely evident in the history of black-white relations.

Research on white tears focuses mostly on discussions about racism, but white tears can also be applied to other “isms” including cisgenderism, ableism, ageism and homophobia. Applying our interpretation of white tears to educational, organizational, and social settings can help bystanders actively witness how collective attention is redirected from uncomfortable conversations about heterocentric white women’s participation in oppressive actions and structures towards topics that are more identity-congruent such as white supremacy among Klu Klux Klan members or hate groups (Accapadi, 2007). White tears derive from conversations or situations that directly or implicitly threaten the privileges of heterocentric white women in social work and American society (Accapadi, 2007).

### ***Case Example***

As an MSW student, Jemel Aguilar was placed in a non-profit organization that serviced children and families throughout an urban and suburban area. As part of the placement, Jemel Aguilar was tasked with conducting a psychotherapy group for elementary school students with internalizing disorders. Each week, Jemel Aguilar would

attend an MSW field seminar through his university where social work interns would share their experiences from the previous week and a field instructor would link the field experiences to the classroom material.

A fellow classmate, a heterocentric, white woman, discussed working primarily with an African American adolescent young woman who was struggling with interacting with peers. During one class, Jemel Aguilar discussed a situation in which he was walking down the hall of the school and a student walked by and said “Nigger” to the author, which the students in the author’s group overheard and reacted to when the group began to meet. Jemel Aguilar discussed the incident with his social work supervisor – a cisgendered heterocentric white woman – who in turn spoke with the principal – a cisgendered heterocentric white male.

The principal decided that the group services were no longer needed and that Jemel Aguilar was not to return to the school. When the author brought this scenario to his peers in the field practicum group, the cisgendered heterocentric white woman began to cry and said “I am sorry. The girl that I am working with said that I am her mentor. But I am white, and she is black.” The group began to comfort her - highlighting how connected the student of color clearly was to her. The rest of the group session focused on comforting her and explaining what she is doing well in this therapeutic relationship. The comment that Jemel Aguilar experienced and the subsequent actions by the school staff were never discussed or revisited.

This example clearly demonstrates how often, particularly in social work educational settings, the needs of white women supersede the experiences of marginalized populations, which is also supported by the research (Dorr, 2004; Hamad, 2020; Tate & Page, 2018). It is important to note that white tears might not always happen quickly such as at the start of a conversation about oppression, but as the conversations about oppression continue and the threats to privilege accumulate the tears will appear and divert the discussion elsewhere.

Avoiding discomfort on the part of white faculty can also appear through grade inflation, which often occurs in response to worry about triggering [white female] students’ tears at not getting a perfect or “good enough” grade. Thirty years ago, scholars wrote about the problematic nature of grade inflation in social work, and today grade inflation remains a problem in social work programs to the point where social work program grades are often the highest across graduate programs at respective universities (Miller, 2013). Likewise, field evaluation scores and performance rates are also often inflated and not an accurate representation of a student’s practice and interpersonal skills (Sowbel, 2011). Through inflating student grades, an educator can avoid uncomfortable conversations about a student’s skill and development as well as attitudes that reinforce white supremacy or ways of participating in oppressive structures that maintain white supremacy as the educator avoids and participates in the student’s avoidance of their own discomfort. In short, social work educators do not like making social work students uncomfortable by asking them to integrate into their professional and personal identities with constructive criticisms that accurately depict the steep learning curve students must overcome to devote oneself to social work practice - particularly the difficult skills recognizing white supremacy, dismantling privilege, and engaging in anti-oppressive practice.

## **Discussion**

As we said at the beginning of this article, we do not intend to provide answers or solutions to the tactics and strategies that white heterocentric women use to limit uncomfortable information that challenges their identities as non-racist. As we have said, these strategies inhibit, purposefully or subconsciously, the dismantling of white supremacy and center the experiences of white heterocentric women while continuing to sideline already marginalized populations. Hiding behind the data, book clubs, and crying and comfort are three such strategies, but others do exist. Although we do not have answers, and our study has limitations, we offer implications for social work teaching and practice as well as accreditation and action-oriented behavior change research.

### **Limitations**

The most significant limitation to this study and autoethnography as a methodology is that it cannot be generalized. We have shared from our experiences, positionality and own bias the strategies we have identified and tied to the prior literature. While there are many advantages to autoethnography, this particular methodology is limited by two other important aspects: the feelings that are triggered within the reader might be uncomfortable or difficult to sit with because the shared narratives may evoke unpredictable responses and willingness, truth-telling, and vulnerability in their self-disclosure requires researchers to share their experiences that can be difficult to replicate or follow upon critical examination of the research (Bochner & Ellis, 1996; Méndez, 2014).

### **Implications for Social Work Teaching and Practice**

Social work is a difficult profession, and when done well, it is always an uncomfortable process. In the first steps of training future social workers, social work educators struggle to both communicate the intricate reality of white supremacy and maintain the needed discomfort with oppression. Additionally, social work educators must maintain the delicate balance between intricate reality and needed discomfort while educating social workers for practice. When students are uncomfortable with course materials or a grade, we discuss triggers and content warnings. While these messages are important for many of our social work students that come to our profession because of their own trauma histories, all social work students must learn to hold their own pain and prevent this pain from becoming an obstacle to helping care for the pain of others. This extends out from trauma histories and into difficult conversations about race, racism, white supremacy, privilege, oppression, and anti-oppressive practice. So, when we rush to comfort white heterocentric women's discomfort, we continue to invest in white innocence as illustrated previously throughout this contribution to social work (Razack & Fellows, 1998).

We do not intend for our experiences to be generalized to all social work programs across North America, however, we do feel that social work education and all programs need to reflect on their role in maintaining white supremacy in the classroom. One such reflective response could be focusing on what Applebaum (2017) refers to as a "pedagogy of discomfort" (p. 863), which "...counters universal expectations that teachers must create

comfortable environments for students and assumes that discomfort can foreclose learning and obstruct change. Discomfort thus becomes synonymous with the possibility of individual and social transformation” (p. 863). Applebaum's statement speaks to the discussion of crying and comfort discussed earlier but also how social work curriculums are conceptualized, created, disseminated, and evaluated.

Similarly, Applebaum (2017) also states that white women, one of the groups that dominates social work education, have developed strategies to talk about race and culture that often fall into “... areas of ‘safe’ and ‘dangerous’ differences, ‘pleasant’ and ‘nasty’ differences, and generating modes of talking about difference that evade questions of power” (p. 869). In what ways are social work educators, social work students, and the profession truly intervening in these attempts to maintain power through comfort while in the social work classroom? This is an important question because of the widely held idiom, “what happens in the classroom will happen in the field.” These efforts to manage the discomfort and draw attention away from white supremacy and white people’s roles, benefits, and privileges in a society built on white supremacy can initiate several defensive tactics such as ethnic cheerleading, non-engagement, performativity, crab theory behavior, and polite avoidance (Pewewardy, 2003). For the profession and social work educators to let these behaviors “slide” in favor of student comfort - or other allied ways of maintaining student comfort - is to maintain white supremacy within the social work education and, upon graduation, in the social work profession. Foundational and advanced practice, policy, and field practice courses need to be embedded with readings, media, role plays, and other action-oriented learning activities that inspire discomfort along with strategies to hold and stay within that uncomfortable space.

In addition to being uncomfortable and holding our students accountable to the spirit of the core values of the social work profession, we must stop avoiding truly and kinesthetically uncomfortable conversations in our classes. While we might intellectually or theoretically discuss race and racism, typically listed in a singular “diversity” course or a human behavior class, our educational training does little to prepare social workers to address the needs of diverse people (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Hence social work does not prepare graduates to address diverse clients. Eventually, as social work students become social work leaders - whether as administrators, educators, scholars, or practitioners – they still do not understand the subtle and intricate ways that white supremacist thinking and behaviors are maintained in social work and society. And similar to teachers, who step into leadership after time in the classroom, social work educators are sorely lacking in how to move social work students from an intellectual discourse about racism to anti-racist practices in the field. Social work education does not discuss how to navigate racially diverse staff, clientele, schools and hospitals, nor does it unpack the privileges perpetuated by segregated social workspaces and the silent racism of white heterocentric social workers. Classes on diversity, oppression, and racism need interventions that are behavior change oriented and evidence based.

A recent podcast by the New York Times, entitled *The Book of Statures*, has begun to explore segregation, desegregation, and the powerful role a small group of people - white folk, place in shaping the entire system (Joffe-Walt, 2020). Conversations such as this one, however, have not yet been broadly broached in social work education. Multiple

theorists identify that social justice education, whose purpose is to disrupt dominant beliefs and practices, requires discomfort to stimulate growth and learning (Berlak, 2004; Garrison, 1999; Kumashiro, 2002; Mayo, 2002; Zembylas, 2018), but we would argue that the majority of social work education has not yet met the requirements to call itself social justice education. Social work is founded in colonialist and reformer values in which untrained “social workers”, then known as friendly visitors, sought to help those identified as poor, impoverished and “less than” through personal example, which is white exceptionalism and moral persuasion. What would social work look like if we began dismantling the very history on which we were founded? The answer to this question or at least a discussion about this topic remains mired in white silence.

### **Implications for CSWE EPAS and Social Work Accreditation**

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Commission on Accreditation is involved in establishing standards for social work education and accrediting social work programs in the United States of America. Accreditation establishes standards for social work education that defines competencies that social work students and social work programs must enact along with the implicit and explicit behaviors exhibited through coursework, field placements, and other learning activities. Accreditation standards, in essence, are a speech act that is both an expression and the performance of an act (Butler, 1988). CSWE’s Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) expresses how social work education *should be* and the courses enact the performance of the social work act. Competency two of the CSWE (2020) EPAS asks social workers and the educational systems that train them to “...engage in diversity and difference in practice, focus on highlighting social workers’ views of their clients and how the social worker may ‘understand’ difference” (p. 4). We believe that this understanding should include also experiencing discomfort about racism, relinquishing the strategies and tactics that prevent discomfort, as well as challenging the continuity of white supremacy that directly flows into and influences social work. The competency could hypothetically read, “social workers will engage with their discomfort about white supremacy, racism, oppression and how it will or does shape their selection of practice populations, assessment of population, interventions, outcome evaluations, and dissemination of outcomes.” As competency two is currently written, it is not surprising that social work programs have just one course on diversity, oppression, or social justice versus widespread integration of this content in all courses in the social work curriculum and field practice, as well as the continued avoidance of actual behavior change that challenges white supremacy and the strategies that heterocentric white female social workers use to alter the course of uncomfortable conversations. As Butler (1988) eloquently states,

...analysis of the place of whiteness in the racial order can and should be, rather than an end in itself, only one part of a much broader process of social change leveled both at the material relations of race and at discursive repertoires. It is not, in any case, realistic or meaningful to reconceptualize whiteness outside of racial domination when, in practical terms, whiteness still confers race privilege. (p. 243)

Following the observations of silence in the social work profession and education around white supremacy, white supremacy is not addressed in the Accreditation Standards despite white supremacy history in shaping social work and American society. Out of nine Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) that guide assignments, evaluation, syllabi, and program development for the bachelor's and master's level (CSWE 2015), not one EPAS currently speaks to or hints at white supremacy, racism, sexism, homophobia, or ableism.

After the death of George Floyd, a Black man killed by law enforcement officers in Minnesota in May 2020, the Council on Social Work Education issued the following statement on social justice:

EPAS require that social work programs prepare students to understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and recognize the extent to which our culture's structures and values oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create privilege and power. Educational standards also require students to understand the global interconnections of oppression and strategies to eliminate structural barriers to ensure that social goods, rights, and responsibilities are distributed equitably. The social work education standards are updated every seven years, and work has already begun on updating standards for 2022. We are calling on CSWE's members, educators, social workers, and others to help us provide EPAS, resources, and guidance that support our profession's ideals. Let us work together and continue to ensure that the 47,000 graduates of social work programs each year are a mighty force for good—one ready to identify and address threats to social justice. (p. 2)

Payne and Askeland (2008) argued that Western social work has the potential to impose postcolonial "cultural hegemony" by imposing its beliefs onto other cultures. An analysis of the CSWE statement above aligns all marginalized groups with white heterocentric female social workers that are a part of, and explicitly or implicitly support, the people, systems, and structures that oppress them, rather than differentiating the positionality of individuals who have developed through and within historical trauma and experienced structural oppression. What will the process of developing the new 2022 EPAS look like in terms of critical analysis and authentically addressing how EPAS can challenge white supremacy, postcolonial "cultural hegemony," by undermining tactics we have discussed in this article that are embedded so deeply in social work curriculum? At the bare minimum and as a starting point for addressing white supremacy in social work education and practice, we suggest and hope for the following CSWE competency as a starting point: Challenge one's own participation in white supremacy.

## Conclusion

Writing this article was intimidating, painful, confusing, overwhelming, and eye-opening. In discussions, we were unsure if we could achieve our goal given the enormity of the problem we saw within the profession and the potential for retaliation that is similar to what other truth speakers have experienced. After all, we both have experienced professional and personal punishments for speaking the truth to racism and oppression. We

were drawn, at first, to providing answers to a problem that extends far beyond our reach. We have grappled with and discussed some questions that could not be answered. Therefore, we selected a research methodology that helped us present our truths, not answers. We hope this foray will continue to authentically deepen the discussion about white supremacy in social work and move the profession towards lasting behavior change.

Elisabeth Counselman-Carpenter has asked herself how this article will be received by folx of color since she is a white person who has been complicit in perpetuating white supremacy through her own personal and professional life. Other reflexive questions include: conversely, how will this article be received by white folx who may see her positionality as potentially traitorous? Is writing this article action-oriented or contributing to the concept that writing more words on a page is enough? How can I challenge my use of these strategies while also calling them out? Elisabeth Counselman-Carpenter and Jemel Aguilar both received disparaging comments via social media based on prior work they have completed and currently hold junior faculty, and thus, professionally tenuous, status. Jemel Aguilar questioned whether writing this would result in white silence and silent hostility towards him from white folx and “can’t we all get along” from folx of color. In other discussions of ideas presented in this contribution, social workers of color said, “you just need to forgive and forget” while white heterocentric female social workers stated, “oppression is just going to happen and there is nothing you can do about it.” We are not willing to lie down and take the assault like “good little social workers.” Our journeys with power, oppression, privilege and at opposing ends of white supremacy have brought us together as an unlikely duo in attempting to challenge the myriad of stagnation we see within our field. At the end of the day, we write this because we are both passionate about social work, we are tired of the different ways we continue or enact white supremacy because it is time to dismantle the glass house social workers have built for ourselves. Our questions, doubts and fears continue to grow during these unpredictable times, and we can only hope to hold each other and our colleagues accountable in finally being the changemakers for which we have congratulated ourselves for being since the inception of our field.

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